Setting the Hook

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/22178929.

Rating:	General Audiences
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationships:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter, Will Graham & Celeste Lambert, Will Graham & Abigail Hobbs
Characters:	Will Graham, Abigail Hobbs, Celeste Lambert, Hannibal Lecter
Additional Tags:	Post Mpreg, Comfort/Angst
Language:	English
Series:	Part 5 of Incidental Fishing
Stats:	Published: 2020-01-09 Words: 5,961 Chapters: 1/1

Setting the Hook

by SaitouLover

Summary

"Filet mignon wrapped in speck duxelles with truffle, potato cake, crepe fraiche, and a truffle carpaccio painted bordelaise reduction."

Will's lips quirked upwards as he glanced at Hannibal. "You made me steak and potatoes?"

A disgruntled look flicked across Hannibal's face before he collected himself and looked down. "Yes."

Notes

This is not A/B/O. Here, it's normal for men to be able to carry as well... just far less common. I'm thinking that for every 1000 female pregnancies there's one male pregnancy. Enough that it would turn some heads but not enough to be considered freakish. Heterosexual pregnancies are still the overwhelming majority because the majority of men who can carry are straight. It can take people by surprise because men don't have external menstruation like women.

Will grew up in a time and place where it wasn't openly acceptable, and so doctors and schools didn't screen for the ability. Things have changed since then but Will never felt the need to get himself checked.

Every Tuesday since they had moved into the refurbished house, one of the pre-determined nights Hannibal remained in Baltimore, Will and Abigail cooked dinner together. It was one of the increasingly fewer bonding moments that the two had. Both Hannibal and BG took up a large portion of their free-time so the two had to make the most of what they had. Abigail enjoyed it, the opportunity to relax and simply be who she was without worry.

That particular Tuesday, midway through November, Will gathered BG from her Pack-and-Play by the kitchen island and slipped her into her highchair at the dining table to the right of his own and across from her big sister's. He and Abigail set the table and dished their plates, both silently appreciating the food for several minutes before Abigail broached a subject Will knew had been coming for some time. Her fork paused over her plate and she glanced at Will before looking back down.

“I want to go to school,” she said finally into the silence.

Will had seen the brochures and Hannibal had mentioned Abigail’s browsing history so the empath merely nodded as he finished his bite and set his utensil down. He lifted his glass of water to his lips and said, “we know,” before taking a drink.

Abigail’s brow furrowed before she shook the surprise away with a roll of her eyes. “Of course.”

Hannibal thought she would wait to broach the subject when she was alone with Will, wary even now of the doctor’s change in heart about her freedom. Will had agreed and they had been proven right. It had been almost a year since Abigail joined Will and BG at Edgemoore, easily slipping into the space that had remained open for her, and had flourished under his and Celeste’s attention. It didn’t hurt that she was smitten with being a big sister. Still, she was more inclined to go to Will first when she needed or wanted anything, and preferred to minimize Hannibal’s influence whenever possible.

Hannibal didn’t begrudge the young woman her wariness, though he was growing disheartened at the lack of progress made in the past 10 months. He never showed it but Will could see it all the same. Will could also tell that the temptation to push rose closer to the surface every time Abigail did an end-run. After pointing out that meddling would only make it worse, the urge was easily controlled but both men knew it was a matter of time until Hannibal was frustrated into action.

Will wiped his mouth and placed the napkin on the table beside his silverware and glass before he gave his older daughter his full attention. “Where are you thinking? First choice.”

“Berkeley?” She glanced up at him before quickly away, nervous at the potential response.

Will’s gut reaction was too far, too far! but he pushed that down in order to appear supportive. “Was that an answer or a question?”

Abigail huffed and turned to him. “I’m not sure. I was also thinking Pennsylvania.”

“State or University?”

“University.”

“Why those,” Will asked, leaning back in his chair. “They’re on completely opposite sides of the country.”

The teen shrugged. “They’ve both got good business schools.”

Will frowned. “That’s what you want to do? Business?”

“Well...” Abigail hesitated. “Celeste won’t be around forever.”

“So you want to take over here?”

Will knew he shouldn’t be surprised. The two women had taken to the other like fish to water, seeing a likened spirit to gravitate to. Celeste adored Will’s eldest child, as equally as

she did Braelyn, and doted upon the young woman whenever the chance arose. No, it was Abigail's desire to remain close to Will and Hannibal long-term that was unanticipated. Their history was a low-grade infection, lanced but prone to relapse. He assumed she would want to live her own life as far away as she could get for quite some time before returning to the nest.

Abigail nodded, bringing Will's attention back to the conversation at hand. "She said that I would do well."

"You would," Will agreed honestly. "You have a good head on your shoulders and are practical enough to handle a lot of difficult situations. You'd be great at dealing with people. Money, too."

The young woman nodded, a light blush stealing across her cheeks at the praise. "I'm not sure what major though. There's a lot to choose from."

"Which is why you want a school with a good overall program."

Abigail nodded again, her eyes lighting up a little. "Berkeley is supposed to have a ton of majors that you can mix and match, and Penn is number one or two country-wide in, like, every business major they have."

"Do you have a preference?"

The enthusiasm that had built until that point seemed to flounder and Abigail sat back in her seat and began to toy with her fork. Will leaned forward and placed his left hand over hers, gently stilling the movement. Abigail looked up at him and he smiled at her.

"I'm not judging. What ever you decide is your choice. I just want to understand so I can help you if you want it."

The room lapsed into silence as Abigail thought her answer over. She eventually pulled her hand away and slipped a thick strand of hair behind her ear, worrying her lip.

“I always wanted to go to college in California. We visited, like, a dozen when I was looking.”

We, Will mused internally. Garret Jacob Hobbs and his daughter on their hunting trips.

“I guess it’s because of that,” she finished quietly.

“Berkeley?”

She nodded.

“Do you really want to go there?” Will pressed, his voice inquisitive.

“I don’t know,” she answered truthfully, her own voice tight from memory.

“What about Penn?”

“It wouldn’t be too far away.”

“That’s important to you then, being close.”

It wasn’t a question but the girl answered nonetheless. “I have a family again.”

Will heard what went unsaid and sighed. He took her hand again and squeezed, making her look at him with a silent command.

“You’re not going to loose us if you want to move away for a while. You’ll always be a part of this family and that will never change, never. You’ll have all of us; me, Hannibal, Celeste, BG... no matter what school you go to. The only real impact would be how often we get to see each other.”

Abigail bit her lip and forced back the glassy look that filled her eyes. She nodded acceptance of Will’s reassurance and went back to eating, effectively ending their discussion. Will allowed it graciously, knowing when respite was needed. He did want the last word though and made one last comment on the topic as he dished himself another spoonful of food.

“Just so you know... Hannibal made a very-thorough list of considerations for schools when he saw your browsing history; and distance isn’t on it.”

Abigail groaned.

_____

“Berkeley or Penn,” was Will’s non-sequitur when he visited Celeste the next night.

The woman looked up from the accounts she was pouring over to where Will was casually leaning against the door frame, arms crossed, and she raised an eyebrow at him.

“For college,” he clarified. “She wants to do something in business.”

A pleased expression stole across Celeste’s face and she placed her pen in the crease of her book. “Good.”

Will pressed off from the entryway and moved to take a seat in front of his friend's desk. "Amazing how her first argument was that you thought she would be good at it."

"I meant it."

"I know. I did as well."

Celeste nodded. "Berkeley is so far away though."

"Yes," the empath agreed, "but if she wants to go then she'll go."

The woman clearly understood the veiled order not to manipulate because her smirk softened. "It will be hard no matter where she goes."

Will nodded. "It'll be good for her though, being on her own for a while."

"It will," she agreed.

"Anyway," Will said, changing the subject. "I need your opinion on something."

"Oh?"

"Mm." The empath leaned forward and rested his arms on his knees. "Hannibal's invited me to dinner this weekend."

"Really?"

Celeste's reply was loaded with veiled meaning, her eyes dark with interest. It reminded Will of that January morning all those months ago where she breakfasted with him and Hannibal and had silently offered to commit murder. Will's stomach flipped pleasantly at the memory and he smiled at the woman.

"Yes. He thinks we need to spend more time together, just the two of us."

"Do you think so as well?"

Will thought about it briefly before nodding. "There's only been a handful of times where Abigail and Braelyn haven't been there as a buffer. I mean, he stays over all the time but we don't really talk. It's a little awkward sometimes and it was never like that before."

"Is it only dinner he's after?" Celeste's gaze was cutting as she observed him.

"No." Will shook his head. "But I already knew that."

"You don't seem to have an issue with it. So what is it you need my opinion on?"

The empath sat back in his chair and crossed his right leg over its partner, resting his hand on the raised ankle. He tilted his head as feelings raced through his mind. It was somewhat difficult to untangle things in his brain but he tried his best to put his thoughts into order. Celeste remained quiet for as long as it took her young friend to gather himself.

"I don't have an issue with accompanying him to his butcher," he started, the true meaning of his words crossing easily between the two. "It's the animals Hannibal prefers to hunt I'm uneasy about."

Celeste pursed her lips and looked down at her accounting book. Long, thin fingers tapped the desktop as she thought Will's words over carefully. After a full minute or so, she met his gaze and shrugged her hand.

“Tell him to change the type of meat. If you don’t feel like pork,” she cut Will a look, “then tell him you want steak.”

“And if he prefers to continue with pork?”

“Then he won’t be graced with your presence at his table.”

Will snorted. “I’d like to see his reaction to that.”

Celeste smirked but waved her hand again. “If he’s as devoted to you as he appears to be, then he won’t have an issue capitulating. Just be honest about it. If he makes a problem of it then he’s not deserving of you.”

The male knew perfectly well what would happen if Hannibal was deemed unworthy, and he felt his smile soften in genuine appreciativeness for the woman across from him. Celeste was the mother he never thought he’d have and Will felt safe with her. Where with Hannibal there had been moments of dangerous unsureness until Will had proven himself, Celeste accepted him completely, without deliberation. It was an island in a choppy sea at times.

“Will you take the girls?”

“You know I will.”

“Thank you, Celeste.” Will smiled at the woman and stood. “Hannibal will be by Friday night and we’ll head out before dinner. I should be back Sunday afternoon. I’ll call if plans change.”

“Have fun,” she said. “Remember to be firm with him if need be.”

Will smirked. “Don’t worry. I’ll bring out the riding crop if I have to.”

Celeste barked out an amused laugh and waved him off, turning her attention back to her work. “Go on, get out of here.”

The car was quiet as Hannibal and Will drove through the night back to Baltimore. They were not that far from Edgemoore, still on the tree-lined rural roads, and there wasn’t another car ahead or behind them in the dark. Without street-lamps, the Bentley’s headlights were the only source of illumination on the deserted highway they were on, white dashes on winding, black asphalt.

“Pull over.”

Will broke the silence quietly, looking out the windshield at the stars that were only truly visible outside the city. Hannibal remained on course for several seconds before moving the car over to the side of the road, parking it on the gravel shoulder. He put the emergency blinkers on with a long, agile finger and turned his head to look at his companion.

Both men remained silent, Will gathering his courage and Hannibal allowing him. Will looked down at his partner’s lap and gently reached over and grasped one of the doctor’s large hands in a loose grasp. Strong digits squeezed his in return as he turned to stare out the front window again, dust floating idly in the yellow headlamps.

“I love you,” Will said simply after a long silence.

The hand in his twitched before it tightened, returning Will’s hold twice over. Heavy silence, not really all that uncomfortable, fell around the pair as they sat idle. After quietly breathing in each other’s company, Will turned his body slightly and tugged at the appendage still latched on to his own. The older man obeyed the unspoken command and leaned forward so their lips could join, a firm press of flesh against flesh. It was chaste, a gentle thing, but Will

enjoyed the willingness for intimacy with the man beside him more than anything else. Eventually Will nuzzled his nose against a sharp cheekbone, smiling and squeezing Hannibal's hand again as he withdrew a little.

"I know you, Hannibal," he started, gaining Hannibal's full attention.

"But," the man prompted, eyes like black pits in the dark of the car.

"If you want me to come with you on some of your hunts," Will kept his gaze firm and steady, "I'd appreciate it if you found a new animal to bring to your butcher."

"Pigs are not to your liking?" Hannibal asked.

Will shook his head. "Not the breed you fancy. Too blissfully ignorant for my taste. I'd prefer to eat something that actually deserves to be dinner. Violent in life, a threat to the herd in need of culling."

Hannibal didn't respond, instead he turned his attention away from Will. It would have been uncomfortable, made Will unsure, except the older man never loosened his hold on the empath. There were minutes without either of the car's occupants moving before Hannibal raised their conjoined hands and pressed a kiss to the back of Will's. His lips were soft with a hint of dryness to them, a ghosting of affection across pale skin.

"I stopped believing that I was truly capable of love a long time ago."

The change in topic was jarring but the younger man absorbed the moment of hesitation and squeezed Hannibal's hand, the action causing the other's lips to brush against his still raised appendage. Hannibal brought their hands down, resting both on his thigh. He continued to stare ahead, not looking at the younger man beside him.

"Mischa was my world and then it was all gone, everything taken from me. They might as well have eaten my heart too."

Will's gut wrenched in pain at Hannibal's confession, so plainly spoken and matter-of-fact. That something so heinous, so unequivocally evil, not only touched Hannibal, but altered the child he'd been so fundamentally he'd subsume cannibalism as a means of coping... it made Will disconsolate and furious all at once. The wrongs done to Hannibal and the wrongs done by him were so intrinsically bound up together that Will's head and heart ached from the vague attempt of separating them. Passion and apathy were cutting into the older man in equal measures, the first suffocating the second before things reversed and the other took it's own pound of flesh in turn.

Hannibal, Will realized, was far more damaged than Will could ever be. He was just better at hiding it.

"I'm glad they didn't," Will said finally, his voice faint from the unsureness weighing his tongue down. "Or if they did, I'm glad it grew back."

Red eyes slid to the side and locked onto Will, expression dangerously even for the first time in months. It made something in Will uneasy but the younger man pushed that aside and tugged the hand he was holding onto his lap. He admired long, strong digits for a while, Hannibal remaining quiet while Will did so, before Will pressed the appendage to his cheek and nuzzled his face into the large, strong palm.

"There are burdens that no one's meant to carry," Will said softly, meeting Hannibal's gaze. "Not alone and not even together. I can't speak about what happened, I don't have the right, but I am going to say I'm glad you were spared, even if you suffered."

The psychologist leaned forward and with his free hand tilted Will's face up so their lips could meet again. He kissed Will with a gentle fervor and bumped his forehead against the other man's when they parted for a sigh. Hannibal gripped the side of Will's neck and kissed his eyebrow softly.

"I thought I wasn't capable of it anymore but I was wrong. I love you. I really do, my mylimasis."

“I know that one,” Will huffed, pleased. “I think you’re the only one to ever call me their sweetheart.”

“Good,” Hannibal said, his voice dipping with possessiveness. He pulled away completely and threw the car into drive, pulling back onto the road. “I’ve been finding that there is a great many things I will do to keep your affection, mylimasis. If it is the breed of swine you object to, I believe I can compromise.”

“Hannibal,” Will’s voice was serious, making the older man glance at him for a moment before returning his attention to the road. “I would never ask you to give up something that makes you who you are. I’m only asking you to chose a safer, more palatable option. Something that I won’t have qualms helping you hunt sometimes.”

The doctor’s hands tightened around the steering wheel in surprise but the man recovered, thin lips stretching into a pleased smile and eyes flashing brightly. The sight made Will smile hisself, and the empath leaned left so he could press his head down onto his partner’s broad shoulder. He put his hand on Hannibal’s thigh, reveling in the heat he could feel through the expensive fabric.

Dinner was, as usual with Hannibal, an artful endeavor.

Though it was only the two of them seated at the doctor's table, the older man still put his usual amount of energy into the presentation. The centerpiece was a wreath of twisted branches with a nest of large, deep-purple feathers in the center and a dozen orange rose buds in full bloom resting on top. Settled on all sides were lit candles, soft light playing off the dramatic arrangement. Tame compared to Hannibal's usual flair but still suitably melodramatic for the showoff, the empath thought fondly.

Will smiled gently as he traced a finger over a soft rose petal, admiring the color of the flower. Favorite things had never come up in conversations between the two men but it must have been sussed out at some point seeing as there was no other reason for Will’s favorite

flower to be laid out in front of him. A grotesque yet beautiful bouquet over a candle-lit dinner, just for him. Hannibal, Will knew, was a closet romantic.

Nineteen months, Will thought to himself. Just over a year and a half since the last time he was in Hannibal's house. There was always so much to do with taking care of BG and Abigail, and Hannibal had always been more than happy to come to Edgemoore, that it had been easy to put off visiting the doctor's domain. Will guessed that he was probably avoiding the visit on purpose, if he really had to admit it.

There was a soft clatter from the kitchen and Will looked up just as the door swung open and Hannibal appeared with dinner in hand. The older man gently placed Will's in front of him before doing the same for himself, pulling his chair out and sitting after adjusting a knife absentmindedly. The aroma of well-seasoned meat wafted up to Will's nose and caught his attention, making him glance down at his plate with interest.

"Filet mignon wrapped in speck duxelles with truffle, potato cake, crepe fraiche, and a truffle carpaccio painted bordelaise reduction.”

Will’s lips quirked upwards as he glanced at Hannibal. “You made me steak and potatoes?”

A disgruntled look flicked across Hannibal’s face before he collected himself and looked down. “Yes.”

It was difficult to force down the chuckle but Will managed. He picked up his knife and fork instead and cut a suitable slice from the meat. Hannibal watched him as he popped it into his mouth and chewed carefully in order to truly savor the taste. Will smiled at his partner, allowing appreciation to shine through his eyes and expression.

“Delicious.”

Pleased with Will’s assessment, Hannibal turned his attention to his own meal. The two men consumed their food in silence and Will shook his head when Hannibal offered a second glass of wine. Instead of further partaking, Will gathered the plates and took them to the kitchen, placing them in the sink to soak. As he rolled up his sleeves he heard light footsteps behind

him and he smiled as thick, powerful arms wrapped around his waist, and Will hummed as the doctor rested his forehead on Will's shoulder.

Once the dishes were cleaned and put away, the two men moved into the study. Hannibal offered a familiar bottle of whiskey and Will, remembering their old ritual with fondness, accepted. The empath took the proffered glass and sipped at it as he moved slowly through the room. Things had changed only slightly since that night a year and a half ago when they had conceived BG, but the changes were notable.

The bookshelves that took up the fireplace wall were rearranged. Before, books had been spread out on each shelf. Now, they were consolidated and the most prominent shelves surrounding the mantel were filled with nicknacks and picture frames instead. Will studied the figurines and odds-and-ends for some time, realizing very quickly that they had to have been chosen by the house owner solely to soften the hard and dark edges of the room and not for their aesthetic beauty. His attention easily moved on to the pictures and Will stilled, whiskey glass touching his lips.

There was a photo of Will in his hospital bed holding a sleeping and swaddled BG, one Hannibal must have snuck, and another that Will knew he himself took of Abigail and BG, the first time the teen held her baby sister. Most though, Will noticed as he lowered his tumbler, were of him.

The majority Abigail must have taken with her phone and sent to Hannibal. In them, he was in his preferred clothing and not in the suits he dressed up in for Hannibal. His hair was a birds nest of messy curls and his overall appearance was softer than what he allowed himself when his monster was with them, wanting to reward and please the older man in equal measures. Very few of the pictures were of Will dolled up.

"I find I prefer you when in your own element. You appear much more relaxed, happier."

Will looked back over his shoulder at the older man, brow furrowed a little in confusion. "You don't like me dressed up?"

Hannibal chuckled as he approached Will, red gaze sweeping over the various pictures. "I find you absolutely lovely in your costume, Will, but that is all it is. This is not truly you and

I find myself missing you as you are. You don't need to be my mirror, mylimasis. As you said, your darkness is not mine."

There was a moment of silence before Will set his glass on the mantlepiece and turned to face Hannibal completely. He stepped into the doctor's space, flush with the larger man's chest, and wrapped his arms around the other's neck. Fingers tangled in short blond hair and Will tugged Hannibal's head down so he could take the other's mouth in a deep kiss, lips opening to grant Hannibal's thick tongue access. Hannibal enfolded Will in his own embrace, strong muscles encompassing the empath in a steel grip.

They kissed for what seemed hours, Will and his monster, wrapped up in each other in the fire-lit warmth of the study until they needed air. Hannibal broke the kiss but brushed his wet lips against Will's as they breathed, his eyes hooded with emotion.

"What was that for, Dear Will?"

Will ran his hand through Hannibal's hair before softly kissing the man again. "For being you."

That seemed to please the older man greatly, going by the way his expression brightened. Will chuckled before reclaiming his drink and moving over to the sofa behind them. Hannibal knelt to strengthen the fire and then joined Will on the sofa, maneuvering his body so Will was nestled against his side and under his arm. The empath allowed the slight manhandling so he could rest his head on his friend's shoulder and then sipped at his drink while he watched the flames dance.

"We need to set some ground-rules," Will murmured after a while. He felt Hannibal go still beneath him and rubbed his cheek against the man's shoulder. "Nothing bad. Just, I would feel better if we both agreed about these things out loud."

Hannibal began to run his fingers through Will's hair and turned to lay his cheek on Will's head. "What things, Will?"

“Leave Alana alone.” Will continued when he saw the spark of rebellion in Hannibal’s eyes. “It’s too dangerous, Hannibal. If you need to take revenge, then do it another way. You’re good at being a petty asshole. Do that.”

That garnered an annoyed exhale and narrowed eyes. Will grinned at the other man as charmingly as he could.

“And?” Hannibal prodded, neither agreeing or disagreeing with Will’s first term.

“No pork at my house. Keep it here.”

The psychiatrist hummed once, an unspoken request for an explanation.

“If the worst happens, I don’t want any evidence near Edgemoore.” Near our family, went unsaid but obviously heard. “One of us needs to stay out of prison if you’re found out. I can’t let anyone take BG away.”

“Of course not, darling,” Hannibal soothed. “No meat at your home. What else.”

“I don’t want you feeding BG anyone. Not until I think she’s old enough to understand and make the choice herself.”

That generated a longer silence, one that was slightly tense and left Will unsure of himself. Finally, Hannibal turned his head a bit and placed a soft kiss on Will’s crown.

“Only if you and Abigail join me more often.”

“I’ll join you every Friday evening, during your open slot. Abigail will come if she wants to.”

“You’ll stay the night?”

Will looked up at the older man and gave him a sweet smile. “Only if you want.”

“I will always want you to stay with me, mylimasis.”

“Then I’ll stay.”

“Good. Then we’re in agreement,” Hannibal said.

“Agreement about that,” Will said. “I also don’t want you winding Abigail and Celeste up.”

“I would never.”

The pure innocence in Hannibal’s tone startled Will into laughter and he clutched at Hannibal’s shirt as he buried his face in the man’s shoulder and giggled. His drink sloshed with the movements and Hannibal plucked it out of Will’s hand to avoid it splashing further. Finally, Will collected himself enough to take the glass back and took a sip to calm the remaining snickers.

“No, no you wouldn’t. So I guess you don’t have a problem with that one.”

They were both quiet for a few minutes before Hannibal agreed. “I’m the hunter of our family, I know that. Gabijia will take after you, I think. Just as Abigail has. My main concern has always been Abigail having a proper role model, someone to guide her. With both you and Celeste there, I have no doubt our daughters will do well. It doesn’t make any sense to try to force them to be something they are not.”

“And Celeste?” Will asked, not wanting the woman excluded from their family.

Hannibal chuckled. “I highly doubt Celeste would allow me to ‘wind her up’. I’d probably end up missing a finger or half my body’s volume of blood.”

Will smiled. “She is great, isn’t she?”

The older man hummed and reinitiated his brushing of Will’s hair. “I’m happy that you have someone worthy enough to be considered a parent. I know how important family is to you and that your mother’s absence has impacted you.”

“Absence,” Will scoffed. “You make it sound like she’s on an extended vacation.”

Anger rose up in Will and the empath set his drink down with a loud thump and surged up off the couch. There was so much sudden rage inside him, bottled up and forgotten for years, decades even, that he fisted his hands and tightly crossed his arms to avoid breaking something. He began walking back and forth, body crossing into and out of the firelight. He felt Hannibal’s curious stare and was grateful that the man remained sitting and silent. The absolutely last thing he needed just then was for the psychiatrist to pry before Will was ready to speak.

When Will felt that he wouldn't devolve into hysterical and livid shouting, he exhaled roughly and began speaking about one of the things he had never shared with anyone else. Every word felt like salted glass as it left his tongue, bitter and painful.

“She had the job that paid the bills," he started the story abruptly. "Daddy loved her and he followed her wherever her job took her. Her family gave her an ultimatum and made it clear it was only her they wanted. She decided that she wanted a comfortable life more than she wanted us, so she abandoned us and never came back.”

Will stopped pacing and met Hannibal’s stare with his own furious one. “She moved us one final time to New Orleans, paid the rent two months out and then fucked off back to her parents. She waited until Daddy was at work before she dropped me off at the neighbors and left a fucking note on the dining table for when he got home. He got the divorce papers a week after that.

“Daddy couldn’t afford the apartment on a boatman’s wage so we got evicted. We lived in a empty boat shed on the yard for weeks until he saved up enough to get us into a house. There were times Daddy didn’t eat for days because we couldn’t afford the rent and food for the two of us. We didn’t have power or running water but we had a roof over our heads and I had peanut butter sandwiches.”

Will cut himself off and breathed harshly, glaring at Hannibal. “She wasn’t ‘away’, Hannibal. She left.”

Hannibal waited for Will to continue but when the younger man didn’t he set his own drink aside and stood. He crossed over to Will and carefully drew the ramrod man into his arms, pressing Will’s face into the curve of his neck. Will grabbed the back of Hannibal’s shirt and held on, trying to stop his body from shaking apart. He felt Hannibal press his nose against his scalp and heard the controlled savagery of the Ripper when the man spoke.

“If it would serve to ease you any, my love, I would destroy her.”

“How?” Will asked him, his voice thick with desperation and suffocated tears. “How?”

“I would tear her heart out, William. I would rip her ribs apart and take what she does not deserve.” Hannibal’s tone dropped into something dark, something barely human. “She would be left in a heap of garbage, discarded in filth. Her heart would be placed on a pedestal in a nest of carnations.”

A sob tore itself out of Will’s throat before he could catch it. He pushed his face deeper into his monster’s skin and grit his teeth and forced the tears threatening his composure into a vicious growl instead.

“She is not deserving of you, William,” Hannibal snarled fervidly. “She is not worth your thoughts and certainly not your tears.”

“I know,” Will bit out.

They remained there for a long time, Hannibal holding Will tightly while Will gathered his composure. It wasn’t until Will pulled away and wiped at the wetness on his face that Hannibal gathered the younger man’s hands in his own and gently lead him out of the study and up to the bedroom. The house was dark around them as they climbed the stairs. Shadows that were no longer constrained by daylight slithered out of their corners and their underneaths to swallow hallways and rooms whole.

When they reached the master bedroom, Hannibal undressed Will with a gentleness that once again threatened the younger man's composure and led him to bed. He drew the covers back for Will to crawl in between the soft cotton sheets and then pulled them back over. Lights were shut off and Hannibal easily undressed in the dark. When done, the doctor joined Will, sliding up behind him and draping his larger, heavier form over the slighter male like a weighted blanket. Back to chest, Will let out a shuddering breath and went lax in Hannibal's arms.

It was difficult just then to let the man comfort him to sleep, ease him away from the spiraling thoughts he had begun to fall into, but Will did it. Will closed his eyes and breathed and felt his friend's strong body holding him down and let it all go. Ripper's rage soothed the jagged parts of him that Hannibal's love couldn't completely reach, and the empath reached down and gripped the appendages wrapped around his stomach.

"I love you," he said thickly, "so, so much."

Hannibal was quiet for an exceptionally long time before he responded, tightening his hold until Will was in pain and would have bruises the next day. The empath felt smothered in the other's embrace, trapped between the mattress and the heavy weight of flesh holding him immobile. When Hannibal finally spoke his voice shook and his tone was filled with a darkness that should have terrified Will but did anything but.

"I will never give you up. Nothing will stop me from being with you and I will allow none to come between us. I love you with so much of me there is nothing left of me to do otherwise, Will. You will never be free of me."

Will felt tears flood him at Hannibal's words and he did his best to muffle the sobs that rattled his bones. Hannibal manhandled him around until he was pressed face-first into the bigger man's chest, Will's arms trapped between them. Long fingers ran through Will's curls, short

blunt nails scratching his scalp as they did so. He felt kisses rain down on whatever skin thin lips could reach without jostling Will and Will pressed his forehead against Hannibal's throat.

They stayed like that, Hannibal holding Will so tightly they seemed to be one living being, until Will's tears dried and his body went soft in sleep. For a long time after, Hannibal continued to hold Will in a gentled grip, simply holding and pressing feather-light kisses to his William's hair. Vacant eyes stared off into the distance, unseeing in the dark.

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